

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 562

CE 058 939

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TITLE Techniques: Coach, Consultant, Critic, Counselor: The Multiple Roles of the Responsive Facilitator.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)
JOURNAL CIT Journal of Adult Education; v19 n2 insert Spr 1991
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; Computer Science Education; Consultants; Counselors; Criticism; Experiential Learning; Programing Languages; Student Experience; *Student Projects; Teacher Effectiveness; Teacher Responsibility; *Teacher Role; *Teaching Methods; Tutors

ABSTRACT

Responsive facilitation is an interactive orientation to formal learning that requires an individual to assume a variety of roles and to be comfortable with diverse methodologies. The major roles assumed are coach, consultant, critic, and counselor. As illustrated by the redesign of an introductory computer science course, these practices can be carried on together in a consistent and mutually supportive fashion. The coach/professor meets with teams of students to give advice and encouragement, provides feedback and suggests additional resources, reads project proposals, and writes a response with suggestions. After the proposal has been evaluated and returned, the professor switches to the role of consultant. The consultant clarifies details, initiates discussion of problems of general interest in class, handles difficult problems after class, and supplements in-class consulting with scheduled office hours. As a critic, the professor provides feedback on the proposal and evaluates the finished project. The counseling function requires patience and compassion. The roles can co-exist, provided the roles are discussed with the students. Through the discussion of roles, learners come to understand the shared responsibility of learning and the organizational reality of differential evaluation (grades). (YLB)

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TECHNIQUES: COACH, CONSULTANT, CRITIC, COUNSELOR: THE MULTIPLE ROLES OF THE RESPONSIVE FACILITATOR

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Responsive facilitation is an interactive orientation to formal learning which requires an individual to assume a variety of roles and to be comfortable with diverse methodologies. The major roles assumed are coach, consultant, critic, and counselor. This technique would seem to require that the facilitator assume multiple personalities in order to be effective! However, as illustrated by the redesign of an introductory computer science course, these practices can be carried on together in a consistent and mutually supportive fashion.

In recent years, facilitation has become a favorite synonym for "teaching" in adult education circles. Somewhere on the continuum between self-directed learning and Paulo Freire's description of "banking education" lies facilitated learning. To find the middle ground we analyzed the practice of excellent teachers and determined that they are, at various times:

- Coach;
- Consultant;
- Critic;
- Counselor.

Such an accomplished teacher is called a "responsive facilitator." The responsive facilitator is a servant to the learners but not subservient. He or she creates an environment that stimulates learning and is "there for" the student when needed.

To illustrate these roles, let us consider a specific educational experience. One of the authors was assigned to teach the computer science "service course" for non-majors. This would probably be the only formal computer course these adult students ever took. Also, because of resource constraints, the class had to be taught in large (greater than 150 student) sections.

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A look at the existing course proved depressing. Students were expected to learn a programming language (BASIC) and to complete six progressively more difficult assignments. The assignments were of the type that would appeal to a computer scientist (sort an array into ascending order, calculate the area of a trapezoidal field) but held little interest for the non-specialist. The redesigned course was structured around student-selected projects, group work, and a very humane evaluation system. It has resulted in dramatically lower course drop rates, reduced student anxiety and created a collaborative learning environment. Here is how the course is structured in each of the dimensions of responsive facilitation:

COACH—The quintessential role of a coach is to guide, encourage, and when necessary, correct gently. The coach also builds team spirit, and often demonstrates techniques. In the redesigned computer science class, the coach/professor meets with teams of students when they are selecting their project and gives advice and encouragement. He also provides feedback and may suggest additional resources for the students to draw upon. The completion of this stage is the delivery by the students (who work in groups of up to three) of a "project proposal." The coach/professor then reads these carefully and writes an individual narrative response to each team. While almost always cast in optimistic terms, the response contains suggestions to make the project either harder or easier. This is necessary because students, particularly near the beginning of the course, have only a vague idea of what they will be able to accomplish using the software tools (WordPerfect, Lotus 1-2-3, dBase III and Turbo Pascal) that they will learn to use during the term. If students disagree with a professor's coaching suggestions, they are encouraged to discuss them.

CONSULTANT—After the proposal has been evaluated and returned, the professor draws back a bit on the coaching role and becomes a consultant. As there are always some technical details that need clarification, the students are invited to bring them to the attention of either the professor or their teaching assistants (with whom they meet in small groups several times a week). The consulting function is also carried out in class. As part of the design of each class meeting time is set aside for students to raise problems. If these problems are of general interest they are discussed with the whole class. Specific or quirky problems are handled after class. The class is scheduled for 75 minutes twice a week, and students typically have 45 minutes free after the class ends before their next class, so it is generally not a problem for them to stay around to talk with the professor. This "in-class" consulting is supplemented with scheduled office hours.

CRITIC—Evaluation of a student's work must aim to further the understanding of the learner; to reach for new associations and to consider the topic more fully. Feedback on the project proposal is the first form of criticism, but

the professor is careful to divorce the written proposal report from the suggested project. In some cases students have received criticism on their proposal report but are encouraged to pursue their project. It is often difficult for students to make the distinction between the effort and accomplishments of the report, and the merits of the project.

Of course, the time does come for evaluation of a completed project. Students are offered the opportunity to demonstrate their projects, and many choose to do this. Most are extremely proud of what they have accomplished. They have already received a copy of the evaluation criteria so they know what the professor will be looking for (e.g. "does the program crash if you type in invalid input?"). The best programs are saved; the professor and students are invited to demonstrate them to the whole class.

COUNSELOR—Undertaking an educational project and continuing to perform all of the other adult functions is both challenging and exhausting. By remembering this simple truth the responsive facilitator can be of greater service to his or her students.

The counseling function requires patience and compassion. Students experience difficulty in completing their projects for many reasons. There is a one week "grace period" built into all course deadlines. Students who submit on time are entitled to a second chance in which they get to revise their work. Students who miss the deadline by less than a week merely lost the "second chance" option. Even students who are more than a week late can provide proper evidence (such as a medical excuse) and be given extensions. The professors teaching this course used to hear just about every imaginable excuse for late programs from "my dog was sick" to "a computer virus ate my work." Today, deadlines are met or mutually readjusted in advance.

JUGGLING THE ROLES—In recent writings and talks, prominent adult educators have noted that students value two qualities most in teachers: credibility and authenticity. The first relates to the facilitators's right to teach the subject. Does he or she have the requisite subject matter knowledge? This is rarely a problem at the University level as professors and instructors are recruited for their disciplinary knowledge. Authenticity, of "being the person you say you are" is a much more subtle characteristic, particularly if one is trying to honor the four dimensions of the "responsive facilitator" model. How can you be a counselor and a critic at the same time? Do these multiple roles endanger authenticity?

The author's experience with the computer science class has generally been that the roles can co-exist quite happily, provided the roles are discussed with the students. Through the discussion of roles learners come to understand the shared responsibility of learning and the organizational reality of differential evaluation (grades).

It is interesting to note that in alternate semesters, another group of instructors teach the same course, and have opted for traditional assignments instead of projects. While sufficient data has not been amassed yet to compare the two groups, anecdotally the drop out rate is much lower when students are allowed to work on projects of their own choosing. Summative evaluations are done at the end of term and students are asked if they prefer projects or assignments. The classes that do projects show an overwhelming preference for that approach, though there are a fair number of students who indicated that they "worked much harder in this course than they expected to." This satisfying result would seem to favor the "responsive facilitation" approach. It will be interesting to see how it evolves as it is extended to other disciplines.